

Rewrite Strategy: The Protagonist Pass

[Scott Myers](#)

"It's where the writer reviews their current script and revisits the single most important character in the story."



Focus one rewrite draft on following your Protagonist into and through the story scene by scene

In a parallel universe, I would have traveled twice to Los Angeles last summer, once as a mentor for the Black List / Women In Film Feature Writers Lab, the second time for the Black List Feature Writers Lab.

Alas, COVID-19.

Thus it is in *this* universe, the Black List team, headed up by the inimitable Megan Halpern, came up with a schedule to run both labs using Zoom for a series of remote sessions.

That is how it has come to pass that over the last month, I've been working with 14 writers in both programs. Each is a terrific group representing an impressive diversity of stories and personal backgrounds.



My shaggy countenance during last Saturday's six-hour Black List Feature Writers Lab workshop

Unlike the regular Black List labs which take place in a compressed time-frame — anything from a long weekend

or six days — these remote versions have spanned several weeks. During that time, the participants have met with [Franklin Leonard](#), guest speakers like [Lindsay Doran](#), studio and networks executives, managers and agents, and an impressive array of other mentors including [Kirsten “Kiwi” Smith](#), [Scott Neustadter](#), and [Stephany Folsom](#).

What has been my involvement? I’ve met with both groups at the beginning of the program to prepare them for what to expect and ask them to reflect on the current state of the script project which resulted in them being selected for the lab. In real time, they put pen to paper and answer five questions I pose to them, then share their responses one by one with the group. That set a baseline for an open conversation about all of the scripted content.

Next up, I led a training session on how to pitch a movie project. This year, we combined both lab groups and it was easy to get their attention as I shared with them some emails sent to me from Amber Alexander, a previous Black List lab writer, who wrote this:

I actually had your pitch documents you sent over open as I wrote my pitch and prepared for it. It was especially helpful in building Act II and ensuring that I didn’t go overly into detail. At the end of the pitch they actually clapped. The exec reached out to [my manager] and said it was the best pitch they’ve heard

in years. so I was just beside myself and then I found out last Friday I won the gig.

My main point of focus, however, is the final workshop session which occurs *after* the writers meet with other Hollywood screenwriting mentors. The session, which normally lasts anywhere from 5–6 hours, is tricky because often writers receive widely disparate notes. My goal: To zero in on a path each writer can take to rewrite their script so it is not only improved, but the various feedback translates into a coherent approach to their revision process.

As I worked with both sets of writers, I was struck by this inspiration: After processing feedback and script notes, I gave the writers an assignment to do a **Protagonist pass**.

What is a Protagonist pass?

It's where the writer reviews their current script and revisits the single most important character in the story: The Protagonist.

What do they want?

What do they need?

What is their Conscious Goal by the end of Act One?

What is their Unconscious Goal by the end of Act One?

What is the synthesis of these two goals?

Who or what opposes them achieving their goals?

What do they fear the most?

And my favorite question of all: Why does **this** story **have** to happen to **this** Protagonist as **this** time?

I share with the writers how they need to look at each relationship the Protagonist has with other characters as a **subplot**, a mini-story with a beginning, middle, and end. Reflect on how each subplot ties into and facilitates the Protagonist on their metamorphosis journey.

I challenge them to think through as clearly as possible the nature of the Protagonist's arc. If it's a positive one, examine these four movements:

Disunity — → Deconstruction — → Reconstruction — → Unity

I tell them to spend time digging more deeply into who, why, and how the Protagonist is, and to do that through a series of character development exercises including character sit-downs where the writer experiences the character's inner thoughts, either as a stream of consciousness or monologue.

Once they've done due diligence in getting to know the Protagonist more clearly, they go through another draft of the script, bringing that knowledge to bear on the behavior, beliefs, and actions the character takes.

This is the first year I've had Black List lab writers take on this challenge, but I can tell already in my subsequent conversations with them, they **love** this process. I am not

surprised. The Protagonist is of critical importance:

- *The Protagonist is the story's central character*
- *The Protagonist embarks on a journey*
- *The Protagonist's journey creates the spine of the plot*
- *The Protagonist's journey is a reflection of that character's psychological arc*
- *The Protagonist's goal dictates the story's end point*
- *All the other major characters are linked to the Protagonist and their journey*
- *Of all the story's characters, the Protagonist undergoes the most significant personal metamorphosis*

Spending time with the character, getting to know them better, can only benefit a writer and their scripted project.



So, my advice to you: If you've finished a draft, take on the task of doing a Protagonist pass, focus your attention on that singular character, and see how that will help sharpen narrative.